DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 223 940 CG 016 349

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TITLE Gender and Social Roles: A Distributional Theory of Gender Stereotypes.
PUB DATE Aug 82
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (90th, Washington, DC, August 23-27, 1982).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adults; Employees; *Females; Homemakers; *Males; Power Structure; *Sex Differences; *Sex Role; *Sex Stereotypes; *Social Attitudes; Socioeconomic Status

ABSTRACT

In applying a social structural analysis of stereotyping to people's beliefs about gender, two issues must be confronted: (1) What is the content of stereotypes about men and women? and (2) What are the major differences in the ways that men and women are distributed into social roles? In part, the distribution of females and males into social roles in society explains why women are oriented to expressive (social-emotional) goals and men are oriented to instrumental (task-oriented) goals. To account for the expressive and instrumental aspects of gender stereotypes in terms of sex differences in status, it was hypothesized that those who are higher in hierarchies of status and authority are perceived to be less expressive and more instrumental than those who have lower status positions. It was also hypothesized that the differences people perceive between homemakers and employees parallel the stereotypic differences between men and women. Several experiments, similar in design, were carried out to test these hypotheses. In each experiment subjects read a description of a female or male stimulus person and rated her/him on 18 gender-stereotypic personality attributes. Results of all experiments provided strong support for the social structural analysis of gender stereotypes: the stereotype of male instrumentality and female expressiveness reflected the belief that women and men were differently distributed into homemaker and employee roles. Findings of this research suggest that those sex differences most salient in stereotypes about gender stem from the differing roles women and men play in daily life. (PAS)

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Gender and Social Roles:

A Distributional Theory of Gender Stereotypes

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CG 016349

Paper presented at the meetings of the American Psychological Association, Washington, D. C., August, 1982.

Gender and Social Roles: A Distributional Theory of Gender Stereotypes

One of the puzzles for psychologists who study gender is why gender stereotypes are so strong and persisting, when investigators can generally find so little evidence in their research for the corresponding sex differences in behavior. There are only a few documented sex differences, and most of these are evidently quite small in magnitude. Yet people firmly believe that women and men differ in terms of numerous traits and behaviors.

When confronting this paradox between people's beliefs and psychologists' research findings, psychologists often conclude that the stereotype literature merely shows how biased people are: People have strange beliefs about many groups of people, and, in particular, they have erroneous beliefs about women and men. Despite this bad reputation that gender stereotypes have acquired, slowly and somewhat grudgingly I have gained a certain respect for them as a source of moderately valid data about sex differences. In fact, I now think that people's beliefs about sex differences tell us a great deal about the differences that actually exist in natural settings. Therefore, this morning I will attempt to explain to you how gender stereotypes represent naturally-occurring sex differences by reflecting the distribution of women and men into social roles in our society. I will be describing research that I have carried out with Valerie Steffen at Purdue University and with Wendy Wood when we were both at the University of Massachusetts.

Our theory of the sources of gender stereotypes starts from the assumption that gender stereotypes, like other social stereotypes, reflect perceivers' observations of what people do in daily life. If perceivers often observe a

particular group of people engaging in a particular activity, they are likely to believe that the abilities and personality attributes required to carry out that activity are typical of that group of people. For example, if perceivers consistently observe women caring for children, they are likely to believe that characteristics thought to be necessary for that activity, such as nurturance and warmth, are typical of women.

The activities that people carry out are usually determined by their social roles because each role has associated with it the obligation to perform a certain set of activities. Because of this link between people's activities and their social roles, stereotypes about groups of people should reflect the distribution of people into social roles in a society. Therefore, to explain why stereotypes have certain content, it is necessary to understand how stereotyped groups are distributed within a society.

In applying this social structural analysis of stereotyping to people's beliefs about gender, we faced two issues: (a) What is the content of stereotypes about women and men? and (b) What are the major differences in the ways that women and men are distributed into social roles? Concerning the content of gender stereotypes, we decided to emphasize the beliefs about gender that appear to be most important by virtue of the frequency with which they have been documented by research and amplified by theoretical discussions. These beliefs concern the extent to which women and men manifest expressive and instrumental personal qualities: Perceivers generally assume that women are oriented to expressive (or social-emotional or communal) goals and men to instrumental (or task-oriented or agentic) goals (e.g., Bem, 1974; Block, 1973; Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, & Rosenkrantz, 1972; Spence & Helmreich, 1978).

To explain why women are perceived as relatively expressive and men as relatively instrumental, we considered the two most fundamental differences in

the distribution of females and males into social roles in our society: (a) women are more likely than men to hold positions at low levels in hierarchies of status and authority and less likely to hold higher level positions, and (b) women are more likely than men to be homemakers and less likely to be employed in the workforce.

To account for the instrumental and expressive aspects of gender stereotypes in terms of sex differences in status, we hypothesized that people who are higher in hierarchies of status and authority are perceived to be less expressive and more instrumental than those who have lower status positions. Perceivers' inference that women occupy lower status positions than men, then, may lead them to infer that women are more expressive and less instrumental than men.

By a similar logic, the differing distributions of females and males into the roles of homemaker and employee may underlie gender stereotypes. Although women are much more likely to be employed outside the home now than in earlier decades, the labor force participation rates of women and men still differ considerably (U. S. Department of Labor, 1977). We hypothesized that the differences that people perceive between homemakers and employees parallel the stereotypic differences between women and men--that is, homemakers are perceived as more expressive and less instrumental than employed people. Perceivers' inference that women are more likely to be homemakers and less likely to be employed, then, may lead them to infer that women are more expressive and less instrumental than men.

We have carried out several experiments in order to test these ideas. These experiments share several features of design. To minimize demand characteristics, each subject was presented with a description of only one person. Half of the stimulus persons were female, and half were male. For some stimulus persons, the aspect of social roles presumed to account for gender stereotypes was specified at one of two levels. In other words, in the experiments examining hierarchical

status, some stimulus persons had high status job titles and some had low status job titles, and in the experiments examining the homemaker-employee distinction, some stimulus persons were homemakers and others were employees. For other stimulus persons, the stereotype-relevant aspect of the social role was not mentioned: In the status experiments, the job title was omitted, and in the homemaker-employee experiments, designation as a homemaker or employed person was omitted. When the critical information about the stimulus persons' social role is unavailable, perceivers should ascribe stereotypic attributes to them, because they infer people's roles based on their knowledge of how women and men are distributed into roles in the society. When perceivers know the stimulus persons' social role and sex, role information should determine their beliefs about the persons' attributes. As a consequence, females and males who have the same role are expected to be perceived equivalently.

In our experiments, each subject read a description of a female or male stimulus person and rated her or him on 18 gender-stereotypic personality attributes. Factor analyses of these ratings yielded two orthogonal dimensions--an expressive or "feminine" factor and an instrumental or "masculine" factor. An average of subjects' ratings on the items loading on the expressive factor (for example, kind, understanding, warm) yielded an index of expressiveness, and an average of subjects' ratings on the items loading on the instrumental factor (for example, aggressive, dominant, self-confident) yielded an index of instrumentality.

Status Hypothesis

Our first two experiments pertained to perceived sex differences in status as the source of gender stereotypes. I will summarize these experiments very briefly since their findings were not supportive of the hypothesis that belief in female expressiveness and male instrumentality is explained by belief in women's lower status. In these experiments, subjects read a description of a female or male stimulus person who worked in a bank, supermarket, medical clinic, or university department of biology, and whose job title was high or low status or

no job title was mentioned. For example, in the bank the high status job title was vice-president and the low status job title was teller.

In both experiments, low status persons were believed to be significantly less instrumental than high status persons but low and high status persons did not differ in expressiveness. Although females whose job titles were not given were rated as lower status than their male counterparts, these females were perceived as only slightly more expressive, and, contrary to our hypothesis, they were rated as significantly more instrumental than the males. In fact, female employees, regardless of their status, were perceived as more instrumentally competent than male employees. Although this counterstereotypic belief demanded explanation, the findings of our first two experiments made it clear to us that the stereotypic perception of women as expressive and men as instrumental does not reflect inferred sex differences in job status.

One reason that we pursued the status explanation of gender stereotypes is that Wendy Wood and I, in another series of experiments (Eagly & Wood, in press), had demonstrated that inferred sex differences in status underlie gender stereotypes about social influence. This research documented that the stereotypic beliefs that women are more easily influenced than men and men exert influence more easily than women stem from perceivers' inferences that (a) women occupy lower status positions than men, and (b) the lower an individual's status relative to other persons, the more she or he yields to their influence. Thus, it appears that we should not dismiss inferred sex differences in status as a source of at least certain beliefs about gender. Yet inferred status differences do not account for the more general pattern of perceivers' beliefs about gender--namely, the beliefs that women are especially expressive and men are especially instrumental.

Homemaker Vs. Employee Hypothesis

In another experiment, we investigated whether gender stereotypes stem from the differing distributions of females and males into the roles of homemaker

and employee. We hypothesized that the differences perceived between homemakers and employees would parallel the stereotypic differences between women and men--that is, homemakers would be perceived as more expressive and less instrumental than employed people. Because we believed that gender stereotypes are a product of role differences, we also hypothesized that women and men would not be perceived to differ in instrumentality or expressiveness if they were known to have the same role. Yet, based on the findings of our first two experiments, we expected that female employees would be perceived as higher in instrumentality than male employees. If their role assignment as homemaker or employee were unknown, women and men would be perceived stereotypically because it would be assumed that women are more likely to be homemakers.

In this experiment, subjects rated the personality attributes of an average woman or man, an average woman or man who is employed full-time, or an average woman or man who cares for a home and children and is not employed. As shown in Table 1, ratings of the average woman and the average man replicated the traditional gender stereotype of women as expressive and men as instrumental (ps < .001). In addition, homemakers were perceived as considerably less instrumental (ps < .001) and more expressive than employees (ps < .005). Further, the average woman was perceived as less likely to be employed than the average man ($p < .001$), and the more likely subjects thought it was that the average woman was employed, the lower was her perceived expressiveness, $r(38) = -.19$, $p < .25$, and the greater was her perceived instrumentality, $r(38) = .43$, $p < .01$. Although women and men were rated quite similarly once their social role as homemaker or employee was specified, once again employed women were perceived as significantly more instrumental than employed men ($p < .025$). Except for this greater instrumentality of female employees, these findings suggest that the stereotype that women are expressive and men are instrumental reflects the belief that women and men are differently distributed into homemaker and employee roles.

We were intrigued by this counterstereotypic belief that employed females are more instrumental than their male counterparts and wanted to explain its origins. We were able to discount some possible explanations on the basis of the research that I already described to you. One explanation--plausible on the basis of the status experiments--is that subjects are no longer willing to derogate women on stereotype questionnaires. This explanation was discounted by subjects' perception in the homemaker/employee experiment that the average woman's instrumentality is lower than the average man's. Another explanation is that female employees were rated more extremely because they were believed to be more highly selected for their jobs than male employees. This idea was discounted by the finding that male homemakers, who are more highly selected than female employees, were not perceived to differ from female homemakers. Finally, the idea that females were believed to be especially instrumental because they had to overcome discrimination to obtain their jobs was discounted by the finding that women employees were perceived as especially instrumental in low status as well as high status jobs. It seems unlikely that subjects believed that women face discrimination in obtaining positions such as bank teller and supermarket cashier--two of the low status job titles we utilized in our research.

We carried out a fourth experiment to investigate yet another explanation of the high level of instrumentality ascribed to employed women. This explanation is that perceivers believe that employed women often balance two demanding roles--homemaker and employee. Perceivers may reason that such women have to be instrumentally competent to survive in this situation of potential role overload and role conflict. In this experiment, subjects rated the personality attributes of an average woman or man who is employed full-time, and who is either married or single and who either has children or does not have children. Other subjects rated an employed woman or man whose marital and parental statuses were not described. The dual role explanation of employed women's greater instrumentality

was contradicted by the finding that neither marital status nor responsibility for children affected ratings of women's or men's instrumentality. Once again, female employees were perceived as more instrumental than male employees ($p < .008$), and there was no sex difference on perceived expressiveness.

A fifth experiment examined whether the enhanced instrumentality of employed women stems from the belief that employed women have chosen to be employed whereas their male counterparts have not. In this experiment, subjects rated the personality attributes of an employed woman or man whose freedom of choice was not described, or they rated a woman or man described either as employed by choice or employed out of necessity.

The female employee whose freedom of choice was not described was rated as less likely than the comparable male to be working out of necessity ($p < .001$). As shown in Table 2, the female employee whose freedom of choice was not described was perceived as more instrumental than her male counterpart (although she did not differ from him on expressiveness). As predicted, employees who chose to work were perceived as more instrumental than employees who worked out of necessity ($p < .001$). The instrumentality of the employed woman whose freedom of choice was not described did not differ from that of the woman employed by choice and was greater than that of the woman employed out of necessity ($p < .001$). In addition, the less choice subjects ascribed to the woman whose freedom of choice was not mentioned, the lower was her instrumentality, $r(38) = -.55$, $p < .001$. As expected because relatively little freedom of choice was ascribed to male employees, the instrumentality of the male employee about whom no choice information was given was between that of the man employed by choice and the man employed out of necessity ($ps < .001$).

These findings suggest that employed women are believed to be more instrumentally competent than employed men because they are perceived as working more out of choice than are their male counterparts. Perhaps choice has this effect because jobs are thought to require instrumental behavior, and believing an

individual has chosen to be employed leads perceivers to make the correspondent inference that this individual possesses instrumental personality attributes.

The perception that women are likely to be employed by choice may arise from the assumptions that typically women are homemakers and that women's prima obligation is to care for the home and children. Because traditionally the role of homemaker has not included any obligation to seek employment outside the home, the distributional assumption that women are likely to be homemakers may lead to the inference that many employed women have chosen to be employed. Therefore, even the perception of employed women as especially instrumental reflects beliefs about gender differences in distribution into social roles.

The more general message that we want to convey to you is that this series of studies provided strong support of our social structural analysis of gender stereotypes: The stereotype of male instrumentality and female expressiveness reflects the belief that women and men are differently distributed into homemaker and employee roles, which are thought to require different personal qualities. Perceivers' knowledge that women tend to have lower status than men in hierarchies of status and authority does not explain belief in female expressiveness and male instrumentality. Yet this knowledge may explain more specific inferences about women and men--for example, as I noted earlier, it appears to explain beliefs about how much influence each sex exerts in organizational settings.

As a final point, I want to return to the puzzle that I mentioned at the beginning of this talk: Why are gender stereotypes so strong and persisting, when investigators can generally find so little behavioral evidence for the corresponding sex differences? Gender differences are not very large in most research settings, and especially not in laboratories, because women and men have the same social role in these settings--that of subject. The sex differences observed in daily life that are actually a product of role differences would not be confirmed by controlled research that removes these role differences. Our research suggests that precisely those sex differences that are most salient in

our stereotypes about gender stem from the differing roles that women and men play in daily life.

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Detailed presentation of the research described in this paper is contained in the following two papers:

Eagly, A. H., & Steffen, V. Gender stereotypes are a product of inferences about social roles. Unpublished manuscript, Purdue University, 1982.

Eagly, A. H., & Wood, W. Inferred sex differences in status as a determinant of gender stereotypes about social influence. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, in press.

Table 1

Mean Ratings of Stereotypic Attributes of Females and Males Who Varied in Occupation

Sex of stimulus person	Attribute dimension	Occupation of stimulus person		
		Employee	Homemaker	No occupational description
Female	Expressive	3.31	4.22	3.81
	Instrumental	3.69	3.02	3.00
Male	Expressive	3.39	4.11	3.03
	Instrumental	3.40	2.90	3.46

Note. Means are on a 5-point scale on which larger numbers indicate greater expressiveness or instrumentality. All cell ns equaled 40. For expressive, MS_e = 0.33; for instrumental, MS_e = 0.31.

Table 2

Mean Ratings of Stereotypic Attributes of Female and Male Employees Who Varied in Choice to Be Employed

Sex of stimulus person	Attribute dimension	Choice of stimulus person to be employed		
		Employed by choice	Employed out of necessity	No choice information
Female	Expressive	3.38	3.23	3.41
	Instrumental	3.86	2.95	3.80
Male	Expressive	3.45	2.98	3.27
	Instrumental	3.85	2.66	3.38

Note. Means are on a 5-point scale on which larger numbers indicate greater expressiveness or instrumentality. Cell ns ranged from 40 to 41. For expressive, MS_e = 0.31; for instrumental, MS_e = 0.27.